

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
August 23, 2009  
2<sup>nd</sup> Day of Ramadan

## The Eyes of Others

by Donne Hayden

One of my favorite poems is by Robert Burns, the Scottish poet. It's called "To a Louse on Seeing One in a Lady's Bonnet, at Church." The woman sitting in the pew in front of him is all dressed up in her Sunday finery and is, perhaps, a little pretentious, completely unaware of the louse crawling on her hair and bonnet.. Burns ends the poem with these well-known lines: "O would that the good Lord the gift ha' gie us/ To see ourselves as others see us."

A far darker and more chilling exploration of "seeing ourselves as others see us" occurs in a play by existentialist writer and philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre. In his play, *Huis Clos* (translated as *No Exit*), three people find themselves locked in a small room together. All three are dead, but recently so, and still getting used to the idea. As the play progresses, we discover that the man is a coward and philanderer who was shot by a firing squad for desertion; one of the women was asphyxiated along with her lover by the lover's husband who left the gas oven on while they were sleeping; and the third woman says she died of pneumonia and proclaims loudly that she has no idea why she is there. Later, however, she reveals that she had an affair while married, became pregnant and drowned the unwanted child in front of her lover who then committed suicide.

None of these characters is admirable, so it is no real surprise when they (and the audience) realize they are in Hell. But the quality of their hell is a bit surprising. "Hell is others," Sartre wrote. In this play, the *hell* comes from the fact that, for reasons related to individual character, each person is despised by the other two. The room has no windows, no mirrors, no glass nor other shiny surface.

There is, in fact, only one reflective surface in the room: the eyes of the others. For eternity, there is no relief: the three characters must see themselves reflected only in the eyes of someone who hates them.

“Hell is others,” Sartre said. Specifically, hell is what we do to each other here on earth; hell is human hatred. We see it in the eyes of others who hate us. It is in our own eyes when we hate. In my understanding, however, *heaven* is also what we do to each other on earth; heaven is unselfish love. It is in the eyes of those who love us. It is in our own eyes when we love.

Last Friday night when two young Iraq veterans came here to speak about the different direction their lives have taken, one told a story illustrating the power of looking into the eyes of others, the power of seeing ourselves as others see us, and of seeing others as we would be seen.

Connor Curran grew up in a Fundamental-ist Christian home in Toledo; he described himself as an angry, fearful teenager who became an angry, fearful young man indulging in self-destructive behavior—drinking too much and doing drugs. In college, he could see the direction his life was taking and decided to pull himself out of the nosedive, so he joined the Marines, a move which won him a great deal of approval from family and friends.

Later, after serving two tours in Iraq and returning home, he found he was still fearful and angry. One day he had an epiphany, a flash of insight: he suddenly understood that he had been taught all his life to be fearful and angry. In the blog<sup>1</sup> that he and Josh Strieber keep as they walk across the country, Connor wrote:

*The Church taught me to fear the devil and be ready to fight him off, my parents taught me to fear strangers and be ready to run, my schools taught me to fear speaking my mind to avoid ridicule, and the news as well as society taught me to, well, fear everything in general.*

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<sup>1</sup> Contagious Love Experiment, <http://contagiousloveexperiment.wordpress.com/>

He took it all in, he said, and added his own bitter experiences, maintaining a constant mindset of fear and anger. During his epiphany, he realized that he looked at everyone—people walking down the street, kids, little old ladies, *everyone*—he looked at them negatively, mentally calculating what potential harm they could cause, judging them, and finding them all lacking. “After this realization” he said, “I decided to stop looking at people thinking of the negative things they’re capable of, and to simply see them as fellow beings. When I did that, I began to feel the anger in my life slip away.” His life changed dramatically, beginning with his relationship with his mother. She was very much involved in the church by which Connor felt rejected. As a teenager he had questioned its teachings and stopped going to church; he and his mother had been estranged since then. Now he began to talk with her about his decision to, in William Penn’s words, “try what love can do.” She listened and took it to heart; she changed, too.

While he was renewing his relationship with his mother, Connor remembered an incident in Iraq when he spent time with some prisoners of war. Here is the story he recounted Friday night:

*I remember looking into one man’s eyes and seeing, not this terrorist, not a soulless man hell-bent on destruction of all Americans. I saw a humanity, a spark of life in his eyes that I was now seeing in my mother’s eyes. And I realized that we’re all the same, and we had been fighting this ridiculous war. And I started to wonder: what could I have done with this man had I loved him instead of intimidating him with a gun? . . . And I started to see what love could do. How it could act itself out in the world around me.*

While this recollection shows Connor to be wise beyond his years, I want to focus on the prisoner. What did Connor see in his eyes? He didn’t see what he expected; he didn’t see hatred or fear in the eyes of a man who had every reason to fear and hate him. Connor struggled for words to describe

what he saw in the man's eyes, finally saying, "I saw a *humanity*, a spark of life . . ." Now he recognized it as the same "spark," the same "humanity" he saw in his mother's eyes as she listened to and loved him. The Iraqi prisoner must have looked back at Connor without animosity, without fear; perhaps he too was seeing Connor as a fellow human being.

What could it do to us, to look into the eyes of our enemy and realize he is like us? It could change everything. It could erase hatred, fear and anger, and in Connor's case, it did. A few weeks ago, he joined another young Iraq war veteran, Josh Stieber, on a journey walking and bicycling across the U.S., speaking out against war and for peace, bearing a sign on his backpack that says "Love kills terror."

Another story about the power of meeting the eyes of someone we fear or don't want to know is in the experience of my friend Tom. I've told this story before in another context, but I will repeat it now, for it fits here.

Several years ago, Tom Davis, who teaches Asian Humanities at a high school in Colorado, fulfilled a lifelong dream to go to India. An intellectual, a Buddhist and a man of great compassion, Tom also is an extremely fluent communicator who loves to talk about ideas. When he came back from India, however, he was almost literally speechless, at least about his experiences there. It took him several months to find ways to express what happened. When he did recount some of his stories to me, he mentioned especially the beggars. He said that, though it was against all he believed, he learned to not look at them, to not respond, but to move as quickly as he could through the gauntlet of beggars that appeared everywhere his tour group went.

Then one day, as he emerged from the tour bus and began to move through the crowd, Tom tripped over something and fell to his hands and knees. To his horror, he found himself staring into the eyes of a beggar—a legless beggar who lay on his back on a small board with wheels under it. Tom was shocked, frozen, flooded with shame, humiliation, embarrassment. Though he was unwilling to meet the beggar's eyes, he could not avoid it. "The strangest thing happened when I looked into his eyes,"

Tom told me. “Something—*something*—passed between us. All I saw was a human being, and when he saw me *see* him, he seemed utterly delighted. He was toothless and foul-smelling,” Tom said, “but when he smiled his eyes were beautiful.”

In the eyes of an Indian beggar, Tom saw what Connor saw reflected in the eyes of an Iraqi prisoner of war: “a humanity,” “a spark,” (in the beggar’s case, perhaps a spark of humor).

A final story related to what we see reflected in the eyes of others when we bother to look comes from a book I am reading as part of the Congregational Discernment Project at Earlham School of Religion. The book, *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard, a philosophy professor at the University of California, is fast becoming one of my favorites. In a chapter entitled “The Still Small Voice & Its Rivals,” Willard tells this story.

*A letter sent out by the staff of Guideposts magazine tells of an ordinary suburban housewife who one day, for reasons unknown to her, began to weep and continued weeping for four days.*

*“On the morning of the fourth day, alone in her living room, there was a sudden hum and crackle in the air. She saw a ball of white light through a window, spraying showers of multicolored light in its wake and approaching her with amazing speed. Then it was right there, beside her, and as she looked at it she saw a face.*

*‘He is perfect,’ was her first thought. His forehead was high. His eyes were large, but she could not fix their color any more than she could the color of the sea. His features were lost in the overwhelming impression of life brimming over with power and freedom.*

*Instantly she knew this was Jesus. She saw his utter lack of condemnation, that nothing she had ever done or ever would do, could alter the absolute caring or the unconditional love in his eyes.”*

*According to her account, Jesus was present with her for three months, and then his presence began to fade. When this woman, Virginia Lively, last saw him, he said to her, "I will always be with you." She, like Thaddeus (Jn 14:22), asked Jesus how she would know it if she could no longer see him. He replied, "You will see me," and then he was gone. Some years later while speaking to a church group, she found his eyes looking into hers again—but the eyes belonged to a woman in the second row. "And suddenly she saw his eyes looking at her from the eyes of every person in the room."<sup>2</sup>*

Whether or not you believe this story is immaterial. For Virginia Lively and people she encountered, it was life-changing in the most powerful and positive way. (If the story is not literally true, it should be. I personally believe it happened just as she said.) The message in what she saw—i.e., the eyes of Jesus looking at her “from the eyes of every person in the room” is straight out of New Testament teaching that we are all one, that there is “the Light of Christ” or “that of God” within each of us. (*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.* (Matthew 25:40)

Never mind how difficult we find it to believe that divinity would communicate with an “ordinary suburban housewife,” we find it almost impossible to look into the eyes of our fellow humans.

Why is it so difficult to look into the eyes of others?

Because it is an extremely intimate act.

Because the eyes are the windows of the soul.

Because eyes mirror to another how we see him/her.

Because we see ourselves reflected as the other sees us.

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<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), page 88.

Because we see love or hatred. When we see love, we see also the place in the other where the Light resides.

In the "blessed light of one another's eyes,"<sup>3</sup> we see that we and the other are one, and that insofar as we love, God is in both of us.

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<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Great Carbuncle" (short story).